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AUTHOR Mullin, Anne
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ABSTRACT

There need be no quarrel between those who believe that writing comes primarily from an individual's discovery of selfhood and those who believe that writing is primarily the result of social interaction. Two theoretical perspectives are helpful in considering this issue. The first, presented by D. W. Winnicott, suggests that an infant learns gradually, over time, that it is a separate entity, apart from its mother. In time, the child learns both to recognize and to cope with or to control, at least partially, the separation and otherness of the mother. The second theory, presented by J. Lacan, suggests that a child undergoes a moment of shock or loss during the mirror stage, the time when the child first recognizes himself or herself in the mirror. It could be argued, however, that the mirror stage is not so much a shock as a discovery, a recognition of the already-felt-but-not-represented non-mother. Writing centers are successful to the point that they offer opportunities to discover boundaries between self and other. The process of putting throughts into words requires, as Flower suggests, that thoughts be separated out form intuitive inklings or nudges in the nervous system. The writer must also deal with the risk of misinterpretation. Repeated experiences of separation and restoration--drafting, hearing the draft read, having it evaluated, and rewriting it--strengthen the writer's sense of writing as both self and other. (TB)

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Crossing Over: Individuality and Social Constructivism in the Writing Center.

Presentation for CCCC 1996, Milwaukee
by Anne Mullin, Assoc. Prof. of English and Director of the Writing Lab at Idaho State University

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To arguments pitting those who believe that writing is primarily a form of individual expression of individually derived meaning against those who believe that writing is the necessarily socially constructed expression of socially constructed meaning -- I want to say, Nonsense! (For an excellent treatment of the debate, see Christina Murphy's "The Writing Center and social Constructionist Theory" in Intersections.) There need be no quarrel between those who believe that writing comes primarily from an individual's discovery of selfhood and those who believe that writing is primarily the result of social interaction -- once we consider what I see as a major part of the CENTEREDNESS of Writing Centers. We are sites for what is central to the writing process: the movement back and forth across the boundaries between a writer's individual perceptions and the social shaping of expression in order to negotiate emerging meaning.

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I'd like to mention two theoretical perspectives that have helped me understand how writer/reader conferences help -- indeed how they are essential -- in these private/public negotiations. First, I'd like to talk about the British pediatric physician and analyst, D. W. Winnicott, who did

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landmark work during the '50's in the areas of infants' development of object relations and the sense of individuation. In "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," Winnicott's theories about how an infant comes to develop a sense of self/other or Me/Not me offer a practical beginning point for disciussion. Winnicott posits a physical relationship in space between the infant and the mother; usually the point of contact is the mother's breast. In a gradual adjustment of relative absence and presence, hunger and satisfaction, the infant's awareness of difference grows. Eventually, awareness of the difference between Me and Mother leads to recognition of boundaries between Self and Other. But recognition of the boundaries also leads the infant to seek and find ways to annul them; crying may bring the feeding or cuddling and sense of restored unity. Later in the infant's development, Winnicott explains, a transitional object such as a piece of blanket or stuffed toy will serve as a bridge between self and the increasing otherness of the growing child's expanding world. The transitional object is "a root of symbolism in time, a term that describes the infant's journey from the purely subjective to objectivity" (234).

I think it is important to note that the developing child learns both to recognize AND to cope with or to control, at least partially, the separation or otherness of

the mother. Separation in the most nurturing environment -- the realm of the good-enough mother and child relationship -- thus yields both a sense of self and a sense of otherness, with the playful power to bridge the boundary rather than be stymied by it.

The other theorist I'll mention here is Lacan -- I'm selecting what he has to say about the Stade du Miroir as having particular reference for what we do in our work with student writers. In The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis, Lacan makes much of the toddler's first conscious recognition of his mirror image as Other -- as object. Lacan posits this first confrontation as a devastating shock, as a watershed moment of regret. Lacan is assuming that the mirror confrontation is the first example of otherness for the child, and to find that the otherness is really a separation or alienation of the self is simply too much to bear and thus makes a lasting impression of loss (1-3). In fact, those of us familiar with babies' experiences of mirror images might be more readily persuaded that the mirror occasions a gleeful sense -- not of LOSS but of DISCOVERY, of PRESENTATION, of RE-PRESENTATION -- a figure that can be apprehended as other, but attractive and fascinating. I would argue, then, that Lacan's mirror stage, rather than considered a watershed experience of alienation can be construed as an experience

of recognition for the already-felt-but-not-representable non-mother or self-as-other.

Our Writing Center conferences, I believe, are successful to the extent that they offer opportunities for discovery of boundaries between self and other, and ways to negotiate these boundaries. A student's rough draft can be viewed as a transitional object -- it may still seem undifferentiated from the inner self of the writer, still inarticulated. Linda Flower's very useful description of Writer Based Prose applies here. So does the frequently uttered plaint of writers themselves who say "I know what I mean, I just don't know how to put it into words." True enough. The process of "putting thoughts into words" requires, after all, that the thoughts be separated out from intuitive inklings or nudges in the nervous system or, what Eugene Gendlin calls "felt sense" enough to BE articulated in language -- that process demands recognition that what I think has to be separated from me.

With the separation of ideas or feelings into language, and thus not exclusively part of the self, comes the risk of loss or at least mis-interpretation. The fate of a child's transitional object, as we all know, may be uncertain -- the washing machine may take it away, the cat may get it. The language into which I entrust my inner thoughts may be rejected, fall into alien hands, be marked all over in red

ink. But equally (more?) likely, in a Writing Center conference, this transitional language object may be valued, may be re-presented back to me from another's perspective so that I can restore and reclaim it. Repeated experiences of separation and restoration -- drafting, having the draft read, reading the draft myself, hearing it aloud as different/other and then taking the ideas back in to re-think them -- this process strengthens -- inevitably -- a writer's sense of her writing as both self and other.

Similarly, we can think of our writing conferences as providing the mirror, in Lacanian terms, wherein writers can experience the Object as well as the Subject position. When we read the student's draft aloud to her, she hears it as Other. When we use schema or felt shapes or tinkertoys or other non-verbal representations of, for example, the shape of her essay, or the parallel points she is making, or the possibility of her writing's balance or order, we are demonstrating Otherness. We are showing that writing has Other properties that can be apprehended from Outside, or from the Other side of the glass, and made apparent to a reader -- properties that the writer could not know before the thoughts and feelings got Out There onto the paper.

I'll mention one other Writing Conference technique which can be very effective practice in traversing boundaries between self and other. This involves having

writers WRITE a response to their own drafts. They can use a simple form (What is the main idea? How does the writer support the main idea? Does the writing make you want to agree or disagree? How?) By physically moving away from their original writing to a new piece of paper, asking for different writing from the READER position, requiring the writer now to consider the writer of the original draft in the third person, such a response exercise helps foster the self/other dialogue.

We write as conscious subjects, but what we write is ourselves objectified. Our readers read us and our writing as objects. I believe it is because Writing Centers are places which foster the crossing of boundaries between self and other, between subject and object, between private and public dialogue that they are truly CENTRAL to the development of good writers and good writing.

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